DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 277 886 CE 046 156

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TITLE Whatever Happened to the T-Group? or Issues in the Politics of Experiential Learning.
PUB DATE May 86
NOTE 7p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; Developed Nations; *Experiential Learning; Foreign Countries; Group Dynamics; *Interpersonal Competence; Laboratory Training; *Sensitivity Training; *Social Problems; *Sociology
IDENTIFIERS *Mini Economy; *T Groups; United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

In recent years there has been some evidence of a resurgence of interest in experiential groupwork methods such as T-groups among cooperative and community development workers, feminists, and those concerned with heightening sensitivity to social problems. Two adult educators who believed that experiential laboratory methods can enable students to develop their sociological imagination and to understand some of the relations between their personal history and the social structure within which they operate. They constructed an economic model of interpersonal behavior and applied it in the development of training designs for use with large groups. In so doing they adapted methods experienced in T-group laboratories and used a variety of action research techniques. One event was the Mini-Economy. This 3-day residential event used an experiential approach to explore the way in which interpersonal behavior is affected by economic structures, by creating an economic system in microcosm. Participants paid a fee according to real-life income; daily allowances corresponded to fees. The community was, therefore, faced with the problem of individuals with widely disparate resources and in the course of the event participants ran the gamut of historical social change in the attempt to set up new and workable economic systems. Participants from a wide variety of backgrounds felt that the insights they gained were of relevance to their everyday lives and results seemed to support the potential for exploring economic and social issues in group relations laboratory methods. (YLB)

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WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE T-GROUP?
or
ISSUES IN THE POLITICS OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

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Introduction

One important piece of information which I gleaned from the briefing session in January this year where the six of us who are attending this conference as members of the British and North American professorial exchange were given hints on how to survive the A.E.R.C. was that I should equip myself with business cards; we were told that, 'everybody has them there'. For the first time in my life I had to encapsulate my identity in a form sufficiently concise to fit onto a small piece of cardboard. I hesitated over how to describe myself, but finally decided to eschew the University of Manchester crest and come out as national chairperson of the Group Relations Training Association. I am often rather sheepish about owning up to my degree of involvement in an organisation which promotes the use of experiential groupwork methods, which sponsors an annual T-group laboratory, and whose membership spans a wide range of occupational groups from oil company executives to primal therapists. It seems that T-groups have a pretty negative image, at least as far as a good many adult educators in the U.K. are concerned; when I talk about groupwork training to my colleagues, I consider that I've escaped lightly if they confine their response to a mild sneer at 'that touchy-feely stuff'. More often, my politics, if not my sanity, are called into question.

In this paper I will be rehearsing the argument which I advance to counter the assertion, made by some of my colleagues, that my use of methods deriving from the T-group laboratory squares badly with my background in marxist sociology, my involvement in the feminist movement, and my working-class origins. I will seek to demonstate something of the potential which I believe these methods to have for exploring the links between interpersonal behaviour, economic and social structures and political action, illustrating my argument with reference to work in which I have been engaged over the last three years. I come to this conference with the hope of meeting other educators who share my interests and concerns, in order to develop this work further. I shall begin with some brief observations about the contemporary use of groupwork training methods in the U.K., by way of background.

Applications of T-group training in the U.K.

T-group laboratories (where participants learn about interpersonal interaction and group relations by focussing on their own behaviour and experience in the 'here and now', and are given the opportunity to experiment with new or unaccustomed behaviour) developed in the U.K. in the 1950's and '60's, primarily in the context of management education (see Whitaker, 1965). The association of these methods with business schools and management departments, and hence with the values of capitalism, has served to dissuade many academic social scientists of left-wing political persuasion from exploring their potential, despite the radical origins of the T-group (see Benne, 1965), and the involvement of social scientists in early training laboratories. Others have been put off by the negative publicity given to the wilder excesses

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of the 'encounter movement' of the 1960's, and the association of T-groups with this movement. A number of groupwork practitioners who are concerned with issues of social and political change have expressed dissatisfaction at what they see an an over-concentration on 'personal growth' within such work (see, for example, Duke and Sommerlad, 1981, and Hudson, 1983).

In recent years, however, there has been some evidence of a resurgence of interest in experiential groupwork methods amongst co-operative and community development workers, feminists, and those concerned with heightening sensitivity to social problems such as racism. The precept commonly articulated in the contemporary feminist movement that 'the personal is political' is in keeping with the belief of early T-group trainers that personal change, while most effectively experienced and achieved in small-group settings, needs to be linked with more widespread programmes for social change; the powerful experience of self-insight reported by many participants in self-help consciousness-raising groups may be seen as analogous to much of T-group experience. Some educators have produced manuals which outline practical exercises for use in self-help groups; one of these, a cartoon guide to community group dynamics (Randall, Southgate and Tomlinson, 1980), attempts to show how the insights of such theorists as Wilfred Bion, Wilhelm Reich and Paulo Freire may be used to help members of groups such as workers' and housing co-operatives, which are attempting to do without the hierarchies of authority and control present in most formal organisations, to communicate more effectively with one another. A feminist perpective on various approaches to group therapy is offered by Ernst and Goodison (1981), who also provide a set of self-help exercises. Some aspects of T-group methodology have been adopted by feminist trainers in the context of assertiveness training (see, for example, Langrish, 1981).

Linking biography and history

C. Wright Mills asserted that 'the sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society' (Mills, 1970). I have come to believe that experiential laboratory methods can enable students to develop their 'sociological imagination' and to understand some of the connections between their personal experience and the social structures within which they operate; I have come to this belief through several important features of my own biography. As a student and teacher of sociology, I have been dismayed at the lack of opportunity to reflect on personal experience within many courses in this area. As someone from a working-class family, I am indignant at the neglect of working-class experience within in much sociological literature on social class (although there are some notable exceptions - see, for example, Hoggart, 1957, and Jackson and Marsden, 1962). I am also irritated at the tendency for issues of gender to be overlooked in accounts of the social world produced by male sociologists. My experience as a student of sociology, my involvement in feminism, and my concern with issues of social and inequality all led me towards experimentation with experiential approaches to teaching and research within adult education.

My participation in T-group laboratories convinced me of that laboratory methods have value, although I was critical of the individualistic focus of many T-group trainers, and frustrated at the exclusion of such issues as socio-economic differences between participants by the concentration on the here and now within the T-group. For the last three years I have been engaged in work with a colleague who shares my concern and who is attempting to use

experiential approaches in his work with co-operative and community groups attempting, in order to enable these groups to devise strategies to tackle local economic and employment issues. We have attempted to construct an economic model of interpersonal behaviour and to apply this model in the development of training designs for use with large groups, adapting methods which we have experienced in T-group laboratories, and employing a variety of action research techniques. One event which we ran a year ago was called the Mini-Economy; I will illustrate the approach which we have developed by descibing this event in some detail.

The Mini-Economy: a case study in experiential learning

The Mini-Economy was a residential event which ran for three days in Leeds, Yorkshire, in May, 1985; our aim in this event was to use an experiential approach to explore the way in which interpersonal behaviour is affected by economic structures, by creating an economic system in microcosm. We attempted to draw in a wide range of participants, in terms of income, by creating a fee-structure for the event wherein each participant paid to attend the residential weekend according to his/her 'real life' income. The fees ranged from £10 (15$), for those on a very low income, to £75 (115$) for high earners. We created a currency, called the Bongo, for the event, and on arrival each participant was issued with a cheque book and allocated a daily allowance of Bongo units to match what s/he had paid as a fee, so that participants who had paid £75 were given 75 Bongos a day, those who had paid £55 received 55 Bongos a day and so on. The daily allowance could be used to purchase such basic resources as meals, bedroom accomodation, tea and coffee, alcoholic drinks and use of the lavatories. The idea was for the community to be faced with the problem of how to deal with the fact that some individuals did not have the resources to afford a bedroom, while others had enough resources to exist very comfortably, and of how to reach decisions about, and implement, changes in the economic structure.

My co-organiser and I acted as civil servants within the community, running the bank, taking room bookings and selling tickets for meals. At the outset of the event we advertised various jobs, to enable participants to supplement their basic income by becoming, for example, bank tellers, tea and coffee sellers or lavatory attendants. Prices were arranged so that someone receiving 45 Bongos a day would have enough to buy a bed in a dormitory, three meals, four cups of coffee and a couple of drinks in the bar. As it turned out, of the 34 participants who attended, roughly half had an income above 45 Bongos and could therefore live above subsistence level, while the other have received less than 45 Bongos and therefore faced some form of economic hardship. Approximately one-third of the participants received 75 Bongos a day, their position contrsting starkly with that of the three 'paupers' on 10 Bongos.

The event ran from 5pm on Friday to 4pm on Monday. The only predetermined features of the event, apart from the economic structure described above, were two large group reviews each day, to allow for reflection on the process and experience of the event, and fixed mealtimes and bank opening hours. Limitations on space in this paper preclude a full description of all that took place, something of the flavour of the weekend was captured neatly in a description given by one participant shortly after the event: 'During the first 24 hours we managed to condense five centuries of social change; we lived through capitalism, revolution, socialism and feudalism'. The accuracy of this summary

may be judged from the following extract from the account we wrote of the main events of the Friday and Saturday:

'**Friday, 5.00pm:** Despite prior warnings about 'customs control' on arrival, participants are taken aback at the thoroughness with which they are searched. Mars bars are confiscated and alcohol subject to import duty. Some participants complain about the cold welcome they receive from the civil service, and others do not like paying to use the lavatories.

Friday, 7.30pm: A flurry of activity when bedroom reservations open. Some wealthy people are cautious with their money and book cheap bedrooms, leaving poorer people without a bed for the night.

Friday, 9.30pm: Civil service inundated with job applications. Most applicants say they need the money, but some say they want work in order to meet people. A wealthy person sets up a nightclub and hires bouncers and entertainers, but has problems selling tickets at 3 Bongos each and runs up considerable losses. He is treated as a social upstart.

Friday, 11.30pm: Small groups gather throughout the building and talk about possibilities for tomorrow. One group plans a massage parlour. Another group acts secretively and does not allow others to join.

Saturday, 8.00am: Notes are discovered under all bedroom doors announcing that the kichen and dining room have been taken over by a group demanding the redistribution of wealth in the community. The Kitchen Occupation Group serves breakfast (free to all) through the dining room window.

Saturday, 10.00am: A participant calls a meeting of the whole community (later to be known as the People's Assembly), to discuss how to respond to the kitchen takeover.

Saturday, 11.00am: While most participants are still at the People's Assembly, the civil service lock the bedrooms as a security measure. The People's Assembly sets up sub-committees to plan the new economy. The occupation of the kitchen continues, now with the full support of the Assembly.

Saturday, 11.30am: Individuals from the Assembly begin to demand access to bedrooms. The civil service, suspecting a plan for another occupation, this time of the bedrooms, refuse.

Saturday, 1.00pm: Free lunch is given to all but the civil service, who are refused any food until the bedroom keys are given up. A secret consortium of wealthy individuals called Bedlam Inc. buys the franchise to all the bedrooms and is given the keys.

Saturday, 2.00pm: The civil service opens the bank. There is a raid, and all the bank account records are stolen. The bank closes indefinitely, until the records are returned.

Saturday, 3.00pm: The civil service resign. They are still refused access to food. Individuals suspected of collaborating with the civil service are also banned from the kichen.

Saturday, 4.00pm: The People's Assembly announce the establishment of a new currency, the Bingo unit. Everyone is allocated an equal income, and meals will be free. After negotiations with Bedlam Inc., the People's Assembly buy the franchise to the bedrooms and it is announced that bedrooms will also be free.

Saturday, 5.00pm: An atmosphere of euphoria prevails. Participants address one another as 'comrade'. One person says, 'Now that we have Utopia, all we have to do is work out how to use it'. Realisation dawns that, as meals and bedrooms are now free, there is little left to spend the Bingo units on.

Saturday, 9.00pm: When the bar opens, participants are greeted with the announcement from the kitchen staff of the conference centre that they are no longer prepared to serve meals until participants do some 'real' work around the centre. Their slogan is 'the feeders are leaders', and they refer to themselves as 'the Lords of the Kitchen'. Two participants are recruited to organise a work schedule, and anyone who refuses to work will be refused meals.

Saturday, 10.00pm: The Lords of the Kitchen announce that they have reinstated the civil service as king and queen, and that other participants have been appointed as queen mother, bishop and high priestess. Rumours of feudal rituals spread, and there is talk of a maypole celebration tomorrow.'

By the time the event concluded on Monday afternoon, there had been at least two further attempts to set up new economic systems. In the final large group review seeion, considerable confusion was expressed about how to analyse and interpret our collective behaviour during the weekend, although a number of participants offered individual interpretations after the event, and all those who communicated with my co-organiser and I stressed how much they had learned from their participation. Amongst those who felt that the insights they gained were of relevance to their everyday lives were teachers, co-operative and community workers, academics, social workers, management consultants, several unemployed people and a nun. Jim Brown and I have attempted our own analysis of the Mini-Economy (Brown and Miller, 1985), drawing some comparisons between this event and the Mini-Society held in 1970 (described by Higgin, 1972). We learned a good deal from our experience of running the event Mini-Economy, and are continuing to refine our theoretical framework and our ideas about laboratory design and application. In September, 1985 we applied some of the insights we had gained from the Mini-Economy to set up a research group tho record and analyse the 'social economy' of a large-scale conference (Miller and Brown, 1985). We remain convinced of the potential for exploring economic and social issues in group relations laboratory methods, and we hope to run events similar to the Mini-Economy in future.

Conclusion

In 1987,the Group Relations Training Association, which sponsored the Mini-Economy, and which I referred to at the outset of this paper, will mark 40 years of T-groups in its annual training laboratory and its conference (which I am convening). It has been suggested that the term T-group should be dropped from publicity for the laboratory, since too many people will be put off by its 'flower power image'. I think it may be worth using the opportunity to reflect upon the experience of the last forty years to see if it is possible to return to the original intentions of Kurt Lewin and his associates, and develop the radical potential of laboratory training methods. I hope that this paper will

serve to persuade a few of those who may have been inclined to view the T-group as a relic of the 1960's to think again, and I come to this conference in the hope that there may be adult educators in the U.S.A. who may be interested in working on collaborative projects in the field of experiential learning in 1987.

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